

Self-Esteem, Identity, Belonging, Family, Protection, Love, Respect; fundamental human needs that we all seek. Oh, and also some of the most important and basic reasons why young people join gangs. Young people today are faced with an avalanche of needs, wants, fears, and desires. But, unlike most adults, they have fewer resources and experiences to draw from. Before we can even begin to work with those who are "gang involved" or are about to become "gang involved" we must understand them. We must understand that to be "beat in" to a gang is to feel wanted, even needed. To carry, display, or wear a "rag" or "colors" is to have an identity, to "throw" a hand sign, to feel a sense of belonging. A gun means respect, the gang, safety & protection.

For many, if not most of our young people, gang involvement is a necessity, or at the very least, a perceived necessity, a matter of survival, both emotionally and physically.

Peer pressure, one of the most dangerous methods of gang recruitment is made so because of the much smaller social circles available to younger people. Saying "no" at 30 is a hell of a lot easier than saying no at 13.

"Maria", (not her real name) is 13, pregnant, the oldest of 8 children, one mother, more than one father, none of them in the household. Her face is scarred after a razor attack, 55 stitches, a badge of honor, a gang fight. She is a member of "Bitches4Life". No money, no future, no hope, just "friends", gang friends, days and nights numbed by "weed" and alcohol. Why is she gang involved ? Why not ?

"Maria" is our daughter; mine and yours. Maria needs and deserves respect, an identity, protection, a feeling of belonging, family, and love. If we don't give it to her, they will.

Is gang involvement a natural rite of passage that can pass on harmlessly, much as a teenaged rebellion or a terrible legacy that may end in death or prison ?

We have to identify the assets of our children and match them with their needs and wants. Then we must create, and more importantly, maintain, an environment of safety, hope, and nurturing. This is our responsibility, not theirs.

Structure ? Look at the hierarchy of the "Vice Lords", the "Gangster Disciples". Discipline ? Look at the "Mexican Mafia", "Neta". Prayer ? Listen to the "Almighty Latin King Nation". Our children are talking to us, yelling to us for structure, for discipline, for prayer, for hope and a future. We had better listen. We can blame the media, the gun industry, the "system". But we need to take a long, hard look at ourselves as parents, siblings, neighbors, and friends. Blame is so easy, responsibility a lot more challenging.

A quote from Ice Cube, a “rapper”. “If I am more of an influence on your child as a rapper, than you are as a parent, then you need to look at yourself as a parent.” I am no fan of Ice Cube, but I love the quote. Take responsibility for all of our children, it’s a lot of work but so is digging graves.

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Dedicated to the memory of Sokphea So, 15 years young.

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